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SUBJECT: REVOLUTIONARY DEMOCRACY!

Classified By: Ambassador Donald Yamamoto for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Understanding Ethiopia's domestic political (and economic) actions, and developing a strategy for moving the ruling party forward democratically, requires understanding the ruling Tigrean People's Liberation Front's (TPLF) prevailing political ideology: Revolutionary Democracy. Hard-line TPLF politburo ideologues explain the concept in antiquated Marxist terms reminiscent of the TPLF's precursor Marxist-Leninist League of Tigray. Western leaning TPLF members and more distant central committee members from non-TPLF parties within the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) coalition generally shed the Marxist rhetoric of the hard-liners. Still, these interlocutors unanimously describe Revolutionary Democracy as a top-down obligation of convincing rural Ethiopians of what is in their best developmental and governance interest and providing the structures to implement that until the people can do it for themselves.

¶2. (C) Discussions with ruling party officials over the past few months highlighted an EPRDF perception that the 2005 national election results and turmoil stemmed from the party taking the peasantry for granted and not adequately bringing them into the discussion of democracy. In detailing response tactics, however, party officials emphasized to Embassy officers a grass-roots outreach program combined with top-down control of the political environment. Discussions with Ethiopian Government (GoE) and ruling party leaders in the past two weeks show a re-emphasized commitment to the ruling party "taking the lead" only emboldened by what it will view as a mandate from the pre-determined results of this month's local elections. End Summary.

THE REVOLUTIONARIES IN THE PALACE

¶3. (C) An early November 2007 meeting with TPLF co-founder and politburo elder Sabhat Nega shed the clearest (and most authoritative) light on the meaning of Revolutionary Democracy as embraced among the TPLF hard-liners. Sabhat described Ethiopia as a "pre-capitalist society" with virtually no middle class and only a minimal working class. It is incumbent on the TPLF to exhibit the leadership required to transform Ethiopia into a capitalist society. The limited middle class fuels competition within the economy which "can undermine political stability," Sabhat explained. But, the real "enemies" of the state are the "rent

collectors." Therefore, "the revolutionary nationalist elite intellectuals" in the TPLF have the burden of creating an environment among the peasantry to foster the emergence of a "liberal bourgeoisie" and its affiliated political parties ("after a few elections") which will achieve Ethiopia's development objectives and thereby eliminate the need for the TPLF/EPRDF's role altogether. "Without this strategy," Sabhat concluded "Ethiopia will disintegrate."

¶4. (C) Sabhat Nega's views represent the ideological extreme -- albeit still tremendously influential -- among the TPLF elites. EPRDF Central Committee members from non-TPLF component parties shed much of Sabhat's rhetoric while still clinging adamantly to the top-down imperative approach of bringing democracy to the people. Hailemariam Desalegn, chairman of the Southern Ethiopia People's Democratic Movement (SEPDM), has argued to Post that due to poor education and illiteracy the Ethiopian public is too underdeveloped to make a well reasoned, informed decision, and so Revolutionary Democracy is the political bridge by which the "enlightened leaders" can lead the people to democracy. Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO) Deputy Chairman, and Trade Minister, Girma Birru emphasizes the "necessary" state role in the economy to establish an economic incubator fostering "agricultural-industrialization led development" and growth as the necessary pre-condition for democracy. On his part, Amhara Nation Democratic Movement (ANDM) Executive Committee member Bereket Simon emphasizes the merits of the EPRDF's Revolutionary Democracy by arguing that the opposition, writ large, is not ready for democracy because it is bent on street action, all-or-nothing politics, and rejecting the political system rather than the ruling party. The future of multiparty democracy in

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Ethiopia, Bereket told AF/E Office Director James Knight on April 11, lies with "the sons of the private sector" and the EPRDF "must nurture the private sector so that it can establish its own political party to move the country forward."

REVOLUTION FOR THE PEOPLE, AGAINST DETRACTORS

¶5. (C) When asked the lessons learned by the EPRDF from the 2005 election results and ensuing turmoil, the ruling party officials ranging from Bereket Simon, to EPRDF Foreign Relations Head Sekuture Getachew, to the West Wollega OPDO Chairman Kebebew Taferi all reply that the EPRDF learned that it had taken the people for granted, assuming that the people understood what the party was doing because the party had been taking actions in the people's interests. As such, these interlocutors unanimously explain that the EPRDF's response has been outreach to the grassroots, focused in rural areas, to inform the people of their actions as a means to win back public support. Party officials never mention eliciting input or listening to the will of the public rather than informing them of the party's platform.

¶6. (C) Immediately after clarifying that he is not a member of the ruling party, State Minister of Foreign Affairs Dr. Tekeda Alemu told Ambassador and AF/E Director Knight on April 10 that "the stability of Ethiopia over the foreseeable future requires inextricable relations between the government and EPRDF." In moving Ethiopia toward 2010 national elections, Dr. Tekeda acknowledged that the ruling party has to lead the way, but noted that the opposition must become committed to relations with the EPRDF based on greater trust than the opposition currently has in foreigners and diplomats. Regrettably the opposition is more committed to themselves than they are to Ethiopia, Tekeda lamented, and the "authoritarian and bellicose" Eritrean Government's role in funneling money and planting people within the Ethiopian opposition only undermines prospects for positive progress. Furthermore, how the opposition views, and expresses its position, about foreign policy matters will determine the

EPRDF's confidence in them, Tekeda noted. Tekeda specifically argued that the opposition's position on Ethiopia's involvement in Somalia makes the EPRDF question their commitment to Ethiopia. Bereket told AF/E Director Knight on April 11 that in looking to 2010, the EPRDF must focus on two tracks: 1) encouraging an opposition based on a platform of issues, and 2) nurturing the private sector.

COMMENT

¶7. (C) On the positive side, the GoE's strict adherence to a prevailing political ideology aids Embassy Addis and the USG in understanding GoE motives and -- as long as the ideology is accurately understood -- enhances our ability to devise strategies for engaging the GoE to achieve U.S. foreign policy goals. Additionally, the insights shared by ruling coalition officials over the past several months helps clarify that the TPLF and EPRDF truly are committed to democracy and economic development, within the rigid confines of their interpretation of revolutionary democracy. The challenge, however, is how to expand those same rigid confines.

¶8. (C) Sabhat Nega's point that Ethiopia will disintegrate in the absence of the TPLF's revolutionary democracy strategy highlights the rigidity within the ruling party. In the TPLF's collective mind-set, any alternative to its top-down approach of "democracy" threatens the existence and future of the Ethiopian state. The opposition presents even more of a threat to the state -- in the TPLF/EPRDF's eyes -- in light of their view of the opposition as being infiltrated with Eritrean government hacks, bent on all-or-nothing politics, or (in a most generous interpretation) simply committed to a populous-driven bottom up view of democracy. Some GoE officials now are beginning to acknowledge that a functioning state must differentiate between its ruling party, the government, and the state. Still, there is no historical basis in Ethiopia or understanding in the public (or ruling party leaders') psyche of such a separation of roles in Ethiopia. Without such a distinction, ruling party elites appear genuinely to view threats to the ruling party -- such as those posed by otherwise legitimate political opposition

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groups -- as being threats to the state. The late 2005 "Treason" charges against scores of opposition leaders is only the most overt demonstration of this perception. The challenge in moving Ethiopia's democracy forward, therefore, is to identify a strategy that acknowledges the EPRDF's commitment to democracy, work with the opposition to present less of a threat to the EPRDF, and find the delicate balance whereby the mutually exclusive approaches to democracy can be vetted with, and subjected to the will of, the Ethiopian people. Post will soon propose a road-map for engaging the GoE and Ethiopia to advance democratic reforms while navigating this delicate balance. End Comment.
YAMAMOTO